DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 212 352 PS 012 576

AUTHOR Factor, June
TITLE Stories and Books for Young Children. Australian Early Childhood Resource Booklets, No. 4, 1981.
INSTITUTION Australian Early Childhood Association, Inc., Watson.
REPORT NO ISBN-0-909-860-36-x
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 25p.
AVAILABLE FROM Australian Early Childhood Association, Inc., Knox Street, Watson, A.C.T. 2602, Australia ($2.00).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Bibliographies; Books; *Childrens Literature; Early Childhood Education; Foreign Countries; Guidelines; *Story Reading; *Story Telling; Young Children
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

Guidelines for story telling, both for when adults and for when young children are initiators of the story telling, are offered in the first section of this Australian early childhood resource booklet. In the second section, 14 different kinds of children's books, including, for example, story books with pictures, stories in verse, wordless story books, and fact books, are discussed. A bibliography listing approximately 150 items entered into categories broadly based on those mentioned in the text is included in the last few pages of the booklet. (Author/RH)

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AUSTRALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE BOOKLETS

No. 4, 1981

STORIES AND BOOKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

by June Factor

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PUBLISHED BY
THE AUSTRALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSOCIATION INC.

AUSTRALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE BOOKLETS are published five times each year, by the Resources Booklets Committee of the Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. (formerly the Australian Pre-School Association Inc.), Knox Street, Watson, A.C.T. 2602.

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The purpose of the Australian Early Childhood Resource Booklets is to provide a forum for the publication of Australian information which will be a resource to people interested in young children.

Subscriptions to: Australian Early Childhood Resource Booklets
Australian Early Childhood Association Inc,
Knox Street,
Watson, A.C.T. 2602.

Yearly (5 issues) $6.50 including postage (1981)

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The layout and design of this booklet are the work of Dorothy Rickards.

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ISSN 0 156-0999
ISBN 0 909-860-36-x

STORIES AND BOOKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

CONTENTS

TOPIC	PAGE
OVERVIEW	2
STORYING: THE ADULT AS INITIATOR	2
STORYING: THE CHILD AS INITIATOR	6
STORY BOOKS FOR CHILDREN	7
WORDLESS STORY BOOKS	8
PICTURE-STORY BOOKS	9
STORY BOOKS WITH PICTURES	10
BOOKS ABOUT EVERYDAY LIFE	10
FANTASY	10
ORDINARY LIFE WITH A TOUCH OF MAGIC	10
ANIMAL STORIES	10
FOLK AND FAIRY TALES	11
STORIES IN VERSE	13
COLLECTIONS AND ANTHOLOGIES	13
SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR STORY-READERS	14
POETRY FOR CHILDREN	15
'FACT' BOOKS	17
BIBLIOGRAPHY	20

BOOKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

OVERVIEW

"Once upon a time there was a princess . . ."

"Do you remember old Harold? He used to . . ."

"Then she said to me . . ."

Stories, stories, stories. All our lives we tell each other stories, live out stories, dream stories. Is there a human community anywhere, at any time, which hasn't stretched the present and the possible backwards and forwards in this way? Unlikely. It seems as if human beings have a fundamental disposition towards story-telling. It allows us to shape the world, to make sense of our experience, to rearrange reality as we would like it, or as we would wish it to be. We are all story-tellers, from the child who talks to an invisible playmate to the old man who yarns about the good old days.

Sometimes adults forget this. Because so many of us are anxious to plant our children's feet firmly on the path to maturity and success, we stress 'the truth', 'reality', the here and now; we neglect the truth of the imagination, the reality of what-might-be. Albert Einstein advised the mother of a young aspiring scientist to give her son a rich diet of fairy tales. There is a lovely story about a Russian mother (it could be any nationality), who attempted to bring up her little boy on a strict regime of 'the truth' — always giving him a 'scientific' explanation, never telling him stories about talking rabbits or magical princes. In vain. At the age of three he had invented for himself an imaginary bear as a companion; he warned his mother not to get her feet wet in the little stream that he insisted ran between the window and the door. The child's reality was much richer than his mother would allow. (Chukovsky, 1963).

Telling stories isn't telling lies — though we sometimes hear the phrase used in that sense. When we say to a child

Hey diddle diddle
The cat and the fiddle . . .

we are having fun, pretending, playing with ideas, words and rhythms. We aren't denying reality, we are enhancing it, turning it upside down and inside out — for the fun of it, for the child's laughter (**she** knows cats don't play violins!), and for that delicious shaping of the impossible that makes this old rhyme still as good as new.

In the pages of this booklet, it is the **enriching** quality of literature for children that is stressed. Stories and poems are not a substitute for direct experience; nor are they some kind of decorative frill, useful for those odd moments when there is nothing else to do and we want the children to stay quiet and happy. Without stories and poems a child's life is impoverished, her experience shrunken to the immediately visible and 'knowable'. She is cut off from one of the most remarkable achievements of humankind: the artistic expression of actions, feelings, ideas, processes, from literature which arises from individual circumstance and perception yet links us all. Literature (like all the arts) shapes experience, makes it coherent and significant; stories and poems help to make sense of the world. Children, perhaps even more than adults, are hungry to understand and delight in life. They need and deserve the very best in books.

STORYING: THE ADULT AS INITIATOR

We are always making up stories, and we remember the stories that we hear from other people. Between children and loving adults there is a special storying relationship. It begins when the child is very small, and each of her tiny toes becomes 'this little pig'. The baby smiles, there is expectancy in her eyes. If she is lucky, she will hear the story of the five little pigs over and over again. Soon she will anticipate each movement, each word. The same with 'Pat-a-cake', with 'Can you keep a secret?' — all the little verses with which parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins and brothers and sisters

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have been delighting children for hundreds of years. And notice how we always say these rhymes with the young child in our arms, on our lap — at least within touching distance. Can you imagine bellowing 'Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross' across a room? Never! These are close-up stories, I-love-you-you-love-me stories, sharing stories. Touching and telling go together.

> *Leila Berg, a thoughtful and sensitive writer, once observed a harassed young day-nursery teacher in England trying to 'do' "Round and round the garden" — a rhyming finger game — with fifty toddlers at once. Her account, sad and comic as it is — "Round and round — sit* **down** *Errol! Round — stop turning round, Mandy! Round and round the — be* **quiet** *John!" — points up the absurdity of separating the telling from the touching with very small children. (Berg, 1977).*

Some stories gallop, some trot, some meander. "When you were a little boy, you crawled into the grocery cupboard and tipped out flour, sugar and rice into one great heap! Then you . . ." How marvellous it is to hear stories about oneself, to have one's past recreated over and over. And many an adult has caught the attention of a restless child by using that child's name in a story — "Once upon a time there was a little girl called Anne. She lived in a house . . ." Or the story may concern people the child knows, but in a situation outside the child's experience. "Tell me again that story about when Mummy wouldn't take her medicine," says granddaughter to grandmother, with evident satisfaction. How gratifying to know that Mummy was once weak and wicked! It is through such storying that each of us has built up our picture of ourselves and our family.

Telling stories, playing with the sounds and rhythms of poems and finger games are all spontaneous activities in which adults can engage with children from babyhood on.

There is no need for a special place, or time, nor even a great deal of preparation, for every adult holds in his memory a wonderfully varied array of nursery rhymes, riddles, animal stories, and so on. To supplement the oral tradition of our language and culture (which we acquired when **we** were children), there are a large number of attractive and entertaining collections of nursery rhymes, fairy tales and folk tales, singing games and finger plays. (A few are listed at the end of this booklet).

One of the delights of telling a story to children is the immediacy of the experience. Unencumbered by book or the restrictions of a written text, the story-teller looks directly at his audience, gauging its reactions to his words, altering his tempo and pitch to suit the story **and** the listeners, shortening or lengthening the tale as it fits the occasion.

In just such a way, the mother of the great German poet, Goethe, told him stories when he was a little boy.

> *He devoured me with his eyes; and if the fate of one of his favourites did not go as he wished, this I could see from the anger in his face, or his efforts not to break out in tears. Occasionally he interfered by saying, 'Mother, the princess will NOT marry the miserable tailor, even if he slays the giant," at which I stopped and postponed the catastrophe until the next evening. So my imagination was often replaced by his; and when the following morning I arranged fate according to his suggestions and said, "You guessed it, that's how it came out," he was all excited, and one could see his heart beating. (quoted in Bettelheim, 1978).*

Here we see the child not only listening, but **participating** in the story-telling process and even altering its outcome — a procedure much more difficult to incorporate into a story-reading session, where a third person (the writer) has set the order and arrangement of the material.

Traditional stories often have repetitive lines which the children can anticipate and repeat: 'I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down!' 'Run, run, as fast as you can, you can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man!' The pleasure of the story is enhanced for both teller and listener by the child's eager expectation, her evident delight as she joins in whenever the 'choruses' occur.

This enjoyment of repetition extends to the story itself: favourite stories are asked for again and again, and the child seems never to tire of them. Indeed this demand for repetition can pose the story-teller with a problem, as the child may want the story **exactly** as it was told on a previous occasion. Usually, the story-teller learns to oblige — at least to the extent of retaining those phrases and patterns and rhythms which have proved most successful. This is, after all, the way such stories have been created over the centuries: told and told, each telling a discarding of the irrelevant and the awkward, a taking on of an evocative phrase or description.

Certainly we need to be responsive to a child's desire to have a story repeated, for it is by such repetition that she gains 'control' of the story. This means much more than just understanding the meaning of the words used, and being able to follow the plot; the 'control' has to do with the nature of storying, with the child's growing appreciation of the story form and its possibilities. The language of story-telling is usually shaped and patterned in a way that distinguishes it from everyday speech — just as 'Once upon a time' promises an experience quite different from 'Now we're going shopping'. To be comfortable with the language of stories it is necessary for the child to have considerable practice in hearing it. And, of course, there is the pleasure for the child listener of vicariously experiencing the difficulties that confront the characters in the story, while happy in the knowledge that everything will end satisfactorily!

The adult, whether parent, teacher or friend, rarely fails as a story-teller, if only because he is offering the child his undivided attention — and that is something children value very highly. Nonetheless, we all know that some adults tell stories better than others. If you listen carefully to a fine story-teller, you will probably notice:

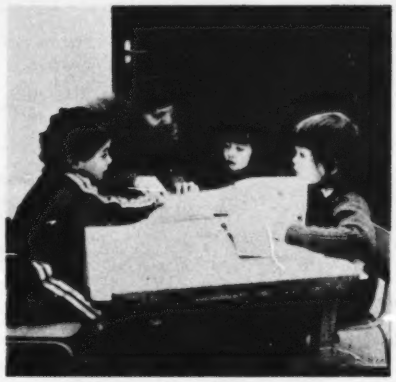
- some mobility of facial expression, reflecting — and sometimes foreshadowing — the changing fortunes of the character in the story. (But **not** a frantic frowning, smiling, eyebrow-raising, lip-pursing mime, which distracts the listener from the story to the story-teller).
- change in volume, pitch and pace of voice as the story requires it. 'Oh, Grandma, what big eyes you've got!' 'All the better to see you with, my dear!' should sound like words spoken by two very different characters. As well, because this is part of a steadily mounting sequence of questions and answers, the story-teller uses the sequence to **lead up to** the final explosive 'All the better to eat you with, my dear!' Too much excitement in the voice too soon will flatten the climax.

In a sense, every story-telling episode is a performance, the teller a kind of actor, knowing his text **and** his audience — the bridge between the two.

Sometimes, like an actor, the story-teller uses 'props': photos, drawings, puppets (from sit-on-knee size to a tiny thimble puppet), a picture roll (a roll of paper on which a series of pictures have been drawn pulled through or around the end of a box so that only one picture shows at a time), or a felt board on which the characters in the story can be moved about. Sometimes the listeners are eager to perform the story themselves, acting out the plot and pretending to be the characters. (A dress-up box of old clothes, shoes, bags, hats and scarves is a valuable accessory here.) Certainly with young children there is no hard and fast division between listening, thinking and doing — they will chant or sing the choruses, make the noises appropriate for a galloping horse or a slithering snake, call out anxiously if the hero is in danger and express audible satisfaction when all goes well. Children like song and verse mixed in with stories, and story-tellers can take advantage of this wholistic approach and enlarge their repertoire accordingly.

Everything that has been said about story-telling in English applies equally to story-telling in other languages. No child should be deprived of stories in his/her mother tongue, and while this poses no problem for parents, it can prove difficult for mono-lingual teachers and child-care workers. Solutions to this difficulty are various:—

- Ensure that the kindergarten or day care centre employs at least one person who speaks a relevant community language other than English.
- Employ itinerant or part-time skilled story-tellers whose languages include the mother-tongue of many of the children in the centre.
- Encourage bi-lingual parents and other willing adults to tell stories to the children in their own language. If the parents are working and cannot assist, contact one or more of the Greek, Italian, Yugoslav, etc., cultural organizations and ask for help.



- Suggest that other bi-lingual children (say from the local high school), might come regularly to tell stories.
- Buy children's books in Turkish, Spanish, etc.
- Invest in a cassette player and a number of earphone sets, and buy story cassettes told in many languages.

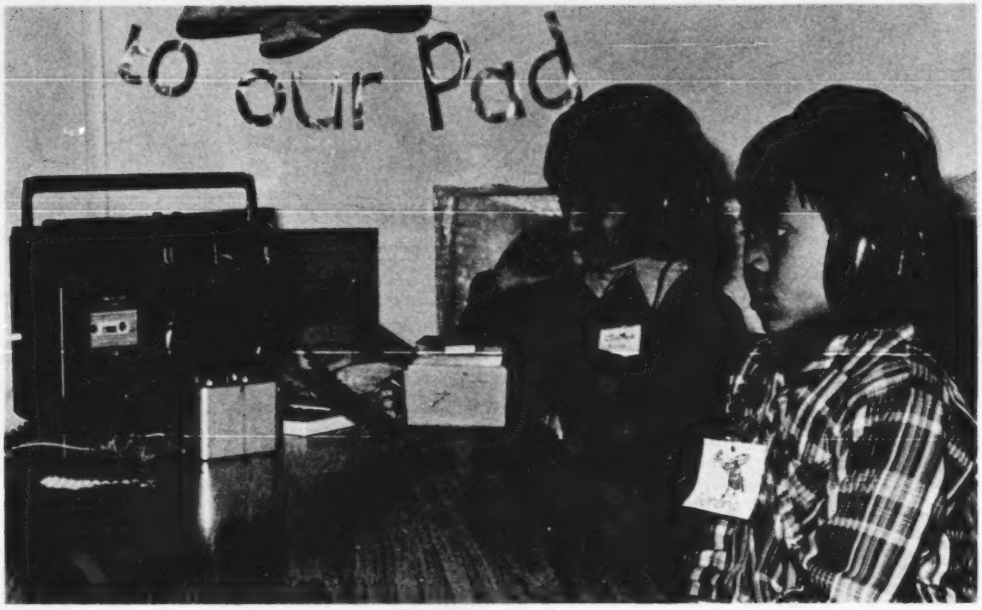
Remember, too, that it is not only the bi-lingual child who will benefit: English-speaking children are usually delighted with such alternative story-telling sources, and are amazingly quick to comprehend story patterns, if not vocabulary. And what better way to sensitise **all** children to respond warmly to other languages, other cultures?

STORYING: THE CHILD AS INITIATOR

The word 'storying' suggests a two-way process: **from** the child as well as to her. This means that we need to pay attention when the child tells us stories. Indeed, all that we know about child development points to our **encouraging** the child to talk, to imagine, to play with the sounds and meanings of words — to **shape** his experience, and, in the shaping, make sense of it. Blessed is the child who has adults around him who listen without laughing at him, without constantly correcting him, without taking his story out of his mouth and telling it 'better'. If you want a child to develop confidence in speech and thought — let him take his share of storying.

- Make a special time for 'story-telling'. Every day (once a week is not enough to develop fluency, confidence and imagination), one or two children 'share' a favourite story (their own creation or a re-telling), with you and a few friends. For parents at home this is one of the simplest of activities to organize, and usually becomes a family favourite. It really only requires two people — adult and child, or child and child.
- Encourage the older child to tell stories to younger children. (4-year-olds will happily entertain 3-year-olds in this way, while 6-year-olds and 7-year-olds can sound quite professional!)
- With a group of children, start off a story. 'One day, when the wind was blowing and the grey clouds pushed and pushed across the sky, a small ginger kitten crept up the steps of a big block of flats.' Each child then adds a little, until the story belongs to everyone. This works particularly well with the over-5's, but younger children after a little practice are also quite inventive.
- Encourage the child to develop her story through other media:
  - Drawing a comic strip, perhaps with conversation in balloons (if the child can't write yet, you or an older child can stand in as scribe).
  - Dramatising the story through dressing-up or puppets.

- Turning the story into a song and dance musical.
- Using a series of photographs as the basis of a story. (You can easily and quickly produce ten quite professional photos with an Instamatic camera. Children especially love such a series when it is about themselves, with perhaps pirate patches or other strange costuming to add adventure and humour.)
- Taping a child's stories and then making them available for other children to listen to (if the story-teller agrees — a most important precondition.)
- If a home movie camera is available, then make a short film which 6-8 year-olds can plan, and elaborate on later.



STORY BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

So far we have focused on the way in which all people are story-tellers, young and old alike. But there is a special sort of story-telling which is so well shaped and well expressed — beautiful to listen to, read and think about — that we call it art. These days much of this sort of story-telling can be found between the covers of books. (But not all: the finest of all story-tellers is still the great ANONYMOUS, and there are many books published that are not worth reading once, much less over and over.) Some people have called the last twenty years a Golden Age for children's books. Never before has there been such a rich variety of story books, with and without words. Some of the finest illustrators and writers have directed their talents to the young, with remarkable results. To list them all would be to fill the pages of this booklet, but what is most striking for anyone who examines modern children's literature is the immense variety of offerings in bookshops and children's libraries. There are large books and small books, thin books and fat, multi-coloured and monochrome, traditional fairytales and UFOs, verse and prose, stories about cottages in the woods and high-rise flats, group adventures and the solitary, struggling hero/heroine. The list is endless, and the quality, though variable, includes work of a high standard of conception and design.

WORDLESS STORY BOOKS

There are two types of story books without any text: the rag and thick board books produced for babies, and the usually far more sophisticated books where the story emerges from a close study of the illustrations.

The first type are not really story books at all, being generally a series of separate pictures, perhaps of domestic objects and/or animals. They are often given to infants because they withstand the chewing, bending and throwing that babies delight in. However, their value as books is rather limited: they don't **feel** like books and their illustrations rarely rise above the commonplace. Those made of laminated card are light enough for small hands, and are more 'book-like', but they can't substitute for a baby's experience with a 'real' book: that is, sitting on an adult's lap, watching the pages turn, hearing the words, having interesting illustrations pointed out, etc. Leila Berg describes this very well:

> *When he is only a little over a year old, you can see such a baby sitting on his mother's lap — or in the lap of another adult — looking at a picture book . . . As he looks at the picture he leans against her body, feels her warmth, her softness and firmness, and traces with his own hands and his own eyes the arms protectively around him. Then he looks back to the book — and he listens. . . . He reaches a hand upwards and backwards and tries to pick out between finger and thumb the words as they come from the lips. He puts his hand over the mouth to* **feel** *the sounds and breath that comes with them. Then he looks at the book again. At this point, probably, his parent or whoever holds him quite instinctively puts* **him** *in the book. She says, 'Oh, there's a mug like Sam's. Is that Sam's mug?' 'Look, there's a cat like Sam's. Is it Sam's pussy-cat?' And so this baby is* **in** *the book; this is this individual baby's book. It is a book about* **him** *— no one else. (Berg, 1977).*

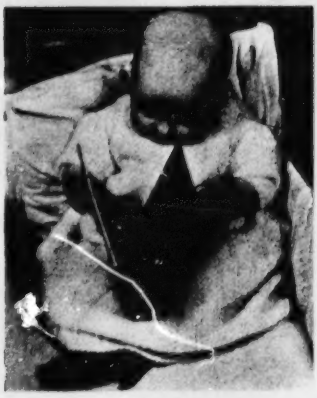
A baby who has such a loving introduction to books is usually a competent and eager 'book handler' by 18 months.

The second type of wordless story book depends for its effect on the skill of the artist in presenting a series of connected pictures which are linked by the 'story' the child makes up in her head as she turns the pages. Such books range from the beautiful 'life cycle' series published by A. & C. Black (**Rabbits, The Tadpole and the Frog,** etc.) to the exciting **Adventures of Paddy Pork,** the stylised children, animals and objects in Bruna's books, and the pop-up delights of the old German classic, **The Doll's House.** (All books mentioned in this booklet are listed, with author, publisher, etc., at the back).

These wordless books have the inestimable advantage of allowing each child to create his own story, while at the same time giving the child experience in sequencing, ordering events, recognising the climax and rounding off the story at the end.

It is a mixture of story-telling and story-reading, and an excellent bridge between the two.

A 4-month-old 'book handler'!



PICTURE-STORY BOOKS

There are now many delightful picture books, with a minimum of text, which are especially beloved by pre-schoolers and beginner readers, but which are also witty and clever enough to amuse older readers (including adults). Pat Hutchins' brilliant **Rosie's Walk** uses very few words — one sentence for the whole book — yet is full of comedy and excitement, as the unsuspecting Rosie the hen walks around the farmyard, followed by the hapless fox who nearly catches her half-a-dozen times — but always just misses. In John Burningham's **Time to Get out of the Bath, Shirley,** the mother's one-line complaints, on the left-hand page, contrast with the elaborate, wordless adventures of Shirley in the bath. (Parents and children respond with tremendous recognition to this book!). **Watch Out! A Giant!** by Eric Carle hardly needs the few phrases of exclamation that dot the large, painterly pages, for young children 'read' the detailed pictures without help (although one page with mirror writing is an enjoyable challenge few children can resist). On the other hand, the grumpy phrases that balloon from the mouth of **Father Christmas** (Raymond Briggs), are essential to our understanding of his character: "Blooming snow! . . . Blooming chimneys! . . . Blooming soot!" A comic-book without sentimentality.

> Together, words and pictures make a greater whole than either can achieve separately. Like a good marriage!

Isaac Bashevis Singer, Noble Prize Laureate for Literature, on why he writes for children:

- *Children don't read to find their identity.*
- *They don't read to free themselves of guilt, quench the thirst for rebellion or get rid of alienation.*
- *They have no use for psychology.*
- *They detest sociology.*
- *They love interesting stories, not commentary, guides or footnotes.*
- *When a book is boring, they yawn openly, without any shame or fear of authority.*
- *They don't expect their beloved writer to redeem humanity. Young as they are, they know it is not in his power. Only the adults have such childish illusions.*

(Quoted in **Time** Dec. 25, 1978)

STORY BOOKS WITH PICTURES

The majority of books for children under eight are story books with pictures — that is, books where the text is dominant, although the illustrations may be immensely attractive and interesting. (If you can read the text of a book quite satisfactorily without referring to the pictures, it probably falls into this category.) There are almost as many kinds and styles of story books with pictures as there are writers — hundreds — but most fit into a few major sub-divisions:

BOOKS ABOUT EVERYDAY LIFE

Children love — and need — to see their own lives depicted in story books. The finer the book, the richer is the child's experience of **understanding** as well as recognising domestic, everyday life. The host of books about Timmy's day or Margaret's visit to the supermarket are often dull and forgettable. They lack genuine interest because the characters are flat and un-authentic (children in such books are forever good, clean and polite), and the tone is patronising and sometimes thinly-disguised didacticism. (The writer is really saying: "This is how children **ought** to behave.") In contrast, there is the lovely messy warmness of child life as depicted in Shirley Hughes' **Helpers**, or parents and children (disguised as badgers) rubbing along together in a family beset by quite ordinary dilemmas, in Russell Hoban's marvellous series about Frances (**A Baby Sister for Frances**, etc.) An Australian writer, Jenny Wagner, has contributed a very fine book to this genre in **John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat**, which touches on jealousy and children's fear of aging in a subtle and unobtrusive manner (greatly enhanced by Ron Brooks' detailed, muted illustrations).

Everyday life is, of course, different from family to family, place to place, country to country. At long last we are able to buy books for our children which reflect aspects of **Australian** family life (including hot weather for Christmas) although there is still very little about children whose cultural background is not Anglo-Australian, or children who live with only one parent, or children who inhabit the inner suburbs of our large cities. Here innovative story-telling must substitute for the gaps in story books.

FANTASY

The general label 'fantasy' covers a variety of very different types of books for children:

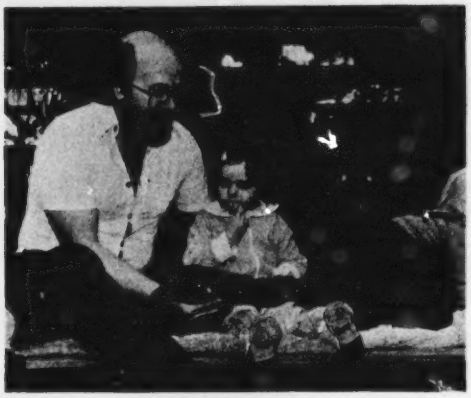
Ordinary Life with a Touch of Magic

One way of creating a convincing fantasy is to base it firmly on immediately recognisable 'reality'. A number of children's authors have used this device to surprise and delight young readers. Thus, the boy in **When the Wind Changed** (Ruth Park), is plainly ordinary — even in his capacity to make awful faces. It is the matter-of-fact working out of the popular belief that 'if you're making a face and the wind changes it will stay that way', which turns this book into an amusing fantasy. Similarly, Lewis' adventures in **The Beast in the Bathtub** (Kathleen Stevens), like those of Mum and Helbert in **Meal One** (Ivor Cutler), are domestic episodes heightened to a delicious absurdity by taken-for-granted magic. From a somewhat different perspective, Leo Lionni in **Little Blue and Little Yellow** has written a story about two ordinary children playing together in everyday situations — except that everything in the book, including the children, is represented by torn-paper coloured shapes. Here the originality of the visual images provides the 'magic' ingredient.

Animal Stories

Aesop's Fables, those short, pithy tales about human foibles and weaknesses expressed through the action of animals — The Hare and the Tortoise, The Fox and the Grapes — is the ancestor of many satisfying story books for children. **Winnie The Pooh** is a descendant, and so are the **Babar** books, the **Frog and Toad** series, **The Magic Pudding**,

and the English children's classics by Beatrix Potter and Kenneth Grahame. Unlike the Aesop stories, these books are not overtly didactic — they don't teach clear 'morals' — but they retain the traditional convention that animals are somehow humans in disguise. This is a convention which children find enormously attractive, partly because animals are particular favourites, partly because the animal world created by an inventive author can dispense with many of the rules and regulations which inhibit and restrict children. There is a freedom in this sort of fantasy that contrasts most appealingly with children's everyday life. It offers an orderly, logical world — an 'image of a possible earthly paradise' (Jan, 1973). Little wonder that these books remain popular long after more 'realistic' stories have been forgotten.



Folk and Fairy Tales

This rich and varied category of fantasy is part of the oral tradition of every culture, passed down by word of mouth from adults to children in a chain which stretches back beyond recorded history. Even those people who have, over the ages, attacked such stories as **Cinderella** and **Red Riding Hood** for being untrue, or frightening, or unnecessarily harsh, have had to contend with the puzzling resilience of the tales, which have survived mass education, the mass media, and our modern practice of large-scale segregation of children from the adult world for most of the day. What is it about these stories (now available in a range of book formats, from the cheap and nasty to the brilliantly illustrated) that makes them so enduring?

- Folk and fairy tales address central, significant questions about human life: love, hate, jealousy, justice, are all matters which concern us all — children included. But children can neither articulate their fears nor comprehend adult explanations of human relationships. Through stories such as these, which use **symbolic** characters and events (the wicked queen, the poor woodcutter's son, the three wishes) to represent the complexity of human experience, it is possible for quite young children to grasp the polarities of good and evil, rich and poor, young and old, wise and foolish — in other words, to gain some insight into the ways of the world long before they have the understanding and experience to comprehend it 'scientifically'.
- Almost all these tales end 'happily ever after'. It is an immense comfort for children to hear again and again of heroes and heroines who face trials and tribulations but emerge triumphant. Jack escapes from the giant, retains the golden goose, and proves to his mother that he is no fool (every child's ambition!). Folk and fairy tales are the most hopeful of literary genres, but they are not sentimental or soft. They recognize — as we all must — that life is a struggle and that worthwhile achievements demand persistence, courage, loyal friends, humour and a modicum of luck (the 'magic' in many tales).

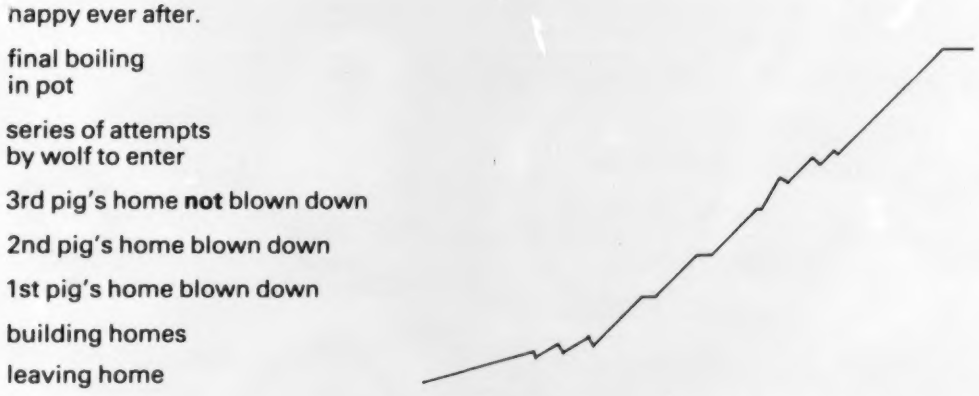
This is exactly the message that fairy tales get across to the child in manifold form: that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable — is part of the human condition — but that if, instead of shying away, one steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles in the end and emerges victorious.

(Bettelheim, 1978)

I think it possible that by confining your child to blameless stories of child life in which nothing at all alarming ever happens, you would fail to banish the terrors, and would succeed in banishing all that can ennoble them or make them endurable.

(C.S. Lewis, 1980).

- A story like the **Three Little Pigs** contains the fundamental structures of narrative that we look for in the best writing for children:
  - — an opening which tells us at once that this is an 'imaginary' story, not a realistic one: 'Once upon a time'.
  - — no long descriptions, endless adjectives, or much reflection. In these stories, the characters act — the readers reflect.
  - — a genuine dilemma (who can build a home strong enough to withstand the wicked wolf?) to which there is no easy answer, but which can, with resourcefulness, be resolved satisfactorily.
  - — conflict about the resolution of the dilemma. Conflict is the salt that flavours every good story.
  - — conversations between characters which convey a sense of immediacy as well as the personality of the speakers.
  - — a pattern, or shape. The **Three Little Pigs** looks something like this:—


nappy ever after.
final boiling in pot
series of attempts by wolf to enter
3rd pig's home **not** blown down
2nd pig's home blown down
1st pig's home blown down
building homes
leaving home

For such an apparently simple story, this is a quite complex pattern, full of new peaks of terror, uncertainty and triumph. (Compare this pattern with the tedious 'and then' stories of the visit-to-the-supermarket-or-farm variety, which look like this: — — — —)

- As the author of **Lord of the Rings** once pointed out, fairy tales are concerned with desirability rather than possibility. They do not pretend to 'realism' of the everyday kind, but organize experience in such a way as to suggest what **might** be, what **ought** to be. They offer the child a 'licence to wonder' (Opie 1974), and thereby encourage imaginative thinking.

This is the merit of the tales, that by going beyond possibility they enlarge our daily horizon. For a man not given to speculation might as well walk on four legs as on two. A child who does not feel wonder is but an inlet for apple pie.

(Opie, 1974)

. . . the value of such tales (is) in developing, strengthening, enriching, and directing children's capacity for creative thinking and imaginative responses . . .

(Chukovsky, 1963)

. . . fairyland arouses a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his lifelong enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted.

(C.S. Lewis, 1980)

STORIES IN VERSE

Some of the most rollicking, comical books for children are written in verse. Banjo Paterson's ballads — **Waltzing Matilda, Mulga Bill's Bicycle, The Man from Ironbark** — have been transformed quite successfully into children's books with the addition of sparkling art work by a variety of talented illustrators. Quentin Blake's **Mister Magnolia,** many of the Dr. Seuss stories, Peter Pavey's **I'm Taggerty Toad** and Peggy Blakely's **Aunt Fan** are all examples of the comical possibility of verse which tells a story. Children love the combination of narrative, rhyme and a strong rhythmic beat: it brings storying close to song.

COLLECTIONS AND ANTHOLOGIES

One of the richest story resources for adults — and for children who can read — are the fat collections and anthologies which contain a variety of stories. Some are written by a single author — **Little Pete Stories, My Naughty Little Sister, Milly-Molly-Mandy** — others by a range of different writers — **The Fairy Tale Treasury, Tell Me A Tale, Big Dipper.** Access to such collections provides both adult and child readers with many stories in the one book — satisfying and economical!

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR STORY-READERS

- Try to choose books to read aloud which **you** as well as the children find interesting — otherwise you'll sound bored, and a bored reader makes for bored listeners.
- There's nothing wrong with reading aloud the same favourite stories over and over — on the contrary, it deepens and intensifies the child's feeling for storying.
- At the same time, it is important for adults to consciously **enlarge** the children's range of books, introducing new stories by new writers — some of which will in turn become 'favourites'. Children need access to a wide variety of books just as they need a varied diet. Regular visits to a children's library by both adult and child will usually provide plenty of new and interesting material.
- Try not to hide behind the book. Children like to see the reader's face; they watch for smiles, frowns, expressions of surprise or dismay. The reader is the interpreter of the story, and visibility assists the child's understanding. Children also like to see the pages of the book — indeed some have taught themselves to read by following the print as an adult read aloud.
- The reader is the link between book and listener, and young children particularly prefer close physical contact to listening from a distance. One adult in a comfortable armchair can be nestled against, touched or leaned over by about eight children.

A relaxed reading environment is usually pleasant for both reader and listeners, and has the added advantage that extraneous rules about sitting up straight, not fiddling, looking to the front, etc., become irrelevant.

- Small children and children who have had little experience as listeners, usually prefer their stories complete in one reading. With practice, however children will enjoy 'serials' — larger books which you read a section or chapter at a time. This method allows quite young children access to collections of stories about the same characters (**Milly-Molly-Mandy, The Muddle-Headed Wombat. Little Peter Stories,** etc.) and delightful novels which they are as yet too young to read for themselves: **Snugglepot and Cuddlepie, The Magic Pudding, Winnie the Pooh, Charlotte's Web, Finn Family Moomintroll.**
- Nobody thinks of not reading to a preschool child because he cannot yet read by himself — but many adults stop reading to children once they **can** read. That's a mistake — unless of course the child makes it clear that he doesn't want to be read to anymore. (Even then, parents have often noticed how older children 'hang about' when stories are being read to younger brothers and sisters.) Most children under 8 (and older, too) love the intimacy and attention that is associated with reading aloud. As well, they may be limited and even frustrated by the 'simple' books presented to beginner readers, and need to have their affection for books reinforced by constant contact with 'real' books — true, rich story books.

A WARNING: A story read aloud is a shared literary experience; it can be distorted and negated if it is turned into a prelude to a series of comprehension questions. **The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle** by Beatrix Potter is not a treatise on hedgehogs, nor on early twentieth-century methods of laundering clothes. If only adults were convinced that the reading and telling of stories is a worthwhile cultural activity **of itself**, they would resist the temptation to hedge it round with boring questions about 'how many?' and 'where did they go?' which deal only with the surface of the story, never with its heart and spirit. That consists, as one writer has pointed out,

> [in]*fostering in the child, at whatever cost, compassion and humaneness — this miraculous ability of man to be disturbed by another being's misfortunes, to feel joy about another being's happiness, to experience another's fate as one's own. Story-tellers take trouble to teach the child in his early years to participate with concern in the lives of imaginary people and animals, and to make sure that in this way he will escape the narrow frame of his egocentric interests and feelings.*
> *(Chukovsky, 1963)*

POETRY FOR CHILDREN

Adults, many of whom find poetry a strange and unfamiliar form of language, do not always recognize that for young children it is their first tongue. If you listen to a baby making her early babbling sounds you will notice how rhyme and rhythm — 'ba ba bà,' 'ba, ba, bà'— exist from the very beginning. It is easier for a child of 12 months to say 'bye-bye' than 'good-bye', 'dad-dad' than 'daddy' — and this apparently occurs with all children, regardless of culture and language. (Chukovsky describes the process with Russian children in **From Two to Five**).

As the child grows, this pairing of sounds gives way to a wider 'playing' with language, using contrast and similarity of meaning as well as of sound. That this is sometimes a conscious exploratory activity is evident from the following transcript of a bed-time monologue by a three-year-old Australian boy:

jumpy, jumpy, jumpy (chant)
We had a piggy
A piggy nick
A piggy nick
A piggy nick?
Oh, that's another good word
(Boomer & Spender, 1976)

The schoolyard children's chant: "You're a poet and don't know it" is very apt when it comes to preschoolers — except that they **do** know it, in the sense that they are constantly trying out new combinations of sounds and meanings. This can lead to 'poetic', metaphoric use of language:

"Can't you see? I'm barefoot all over!"

"Isn't there something to eat in the cupboard?" "There's only a small piece of cake, and it's middle-aged."

(Chukovsky, 1963)

If we appreciate how fundamental is this poetic use of language for young children, we can understand why they are so attracted to all the 'literary' forms of poetry. For most English-speaking children, the very first literature they have access to is nursery rhymes — long and short verses with very regular rhyming and rhythmic patterns. When small children first hear 'Hey diddle diddle', 'Mary, Mary, quite contrary' and 'Hickory, dickory, dock' they are often much too young to 'understand' in the sense of comprehending the words and recognizing their meaning. But that doesn't matter. What matters is the sound, the rhythm, the movement of the lines and the pleasure of the shared activity — for young children usually rock, or clap, or hop as they listen. Later, when they join in the rhymes and make up their own, they still link them with actions. Young children, unlike adults, have not yet separated their pleasures: music, movement, and the harmony and melody of verse go together — and they merge most satisfyingly in nursery rhymes.

After nursery rhymes come A.A. Milne, Edward Lear, Ogden Nash, R.L. Stevenson, David McCord, Eve Merriam, Michael Rosen — a host of poets who have written verse that appeals to children because it expresses feelings and explores experience from the child's point of view, and in language that is soft or chirpy, slow or galloping, sad or merry, as befits the mood of the poems. There are nonsense poems, poems that delight in the beauties of the natural world, poems that focus on a child's fears and small triumphs, mocking poems and morality poems. "A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom" said the American poet, Robert Frost.

The same principles of selection and presentation apply to poetry as to stories:

- Build on the child's own word play and love of image, rhyme and rhythm.
- Dip gratefully into the vast store of traditional verse, starting with nursery rhymes and progressing through limericks and nonsense verse to the ballads and longer narrative poems.
- Let children own as well as borrow poetry collections (**The Mother Goose Treasury, Oh How Silly,** etc.) and the work of individual poets: **When We Were Very Young** (A.A. Milne), **The Owl and the Pussy Cat** (Edward Lear), **Wouldn't You Like to Know?** (Michael Rosen) etc. etc.
- Don't over-formalise poetry reading; it is an occasional muse, and is as appropriate on the jumping board as at an organized poetry session.
- Quite young children can learn to recognize a beloved poet's work. "That's another poem by A.A. Milne" is a simple way of introducing children to the concept of a writer producing an opus of work which is **distinctive** by virtue of its style, subject matter, etc.
- Invest in poetry cassettes and allow the child to play them whenever she likes — a three-year-old is quite competent with a cassette player. There are also some fine recordings of poetry for children, but these may need to be handled by adults or older children.
- Pin up poems everywhere: poetry mobiles, poster poems, poems on windows and doors and the backs of chairs. Poetry does not require a delicate voice or a solemn face!

'FACT' BOOKS

The line between fiction and non-fiction is not always clearly marked in children's books. Many story books inform the reader of 'facts' about the world: how to make pancakes in **Little Black Sambo** and **Potato Pancakes all Around**, what the Australian east coast countryside looks like in autumn in **Barnaby and the Horses**. Others blur the distinction between presenting information and telling a story by coating the 'facts' with fiction. There is a little boy called James in **Emily's a Grizzleguts** who has to come to terms with the arrival of a baby sister; while the purpose of the book is to explore this (general) situation and offer a hopeful solution, it uses an individual child's experience in exactly the same way as a fictional story would. The instructional purpose of **Howie Helps Himself** is even more evident — to give handicapped children a positive model and encourage 'the growth of positive attitudes on the part of normal children toward those who are handicapped.' But again, the writer has resorted to a fictional framework, presumably to make the book more attractive.

We usually categorise as 'fact' books those which have as their **major** purpose the description or elucidation of the material world. They are books in which 'reality' is untransformed by the imagination. If there is a story, with individual characters, these elements are subservient to the informative, factual focus of the book.

> *The writer of an information book sets out to help towards knowledge, and the techniques he uses, which may well include story-telling, will be subordinate to this end. (Fisher, 1973).*

This area of children's literature is notoriously the weakest — the least attractive and interesting. This must reflect adult priorities: it is after all adults who write, publish, sell, review, and buy children's books. For many adults, facts are boring, stories are engrossing. But children are once again more wholistic in their approach; they are impelled by a tremendous curiosity to understand the world, and they may be as delighted by the sequence of egg-chicken-egg as they are by the transformation of frog to prince. However, like adults, they are not indiscriminate in their interests: a child who is fascinated by dinosaurs will look out/read anything she can find on that subject, but she may turn away in boredom from a beautiful book on trees. This is a reasonable response, and we should avoid forcing the same books — fact or fiction — on any child. Enforced acquaintance rarely leads to a lasting attraction.

Good 'fact' books for children have certain characteristics:

- They are always illustrated, and the illustrations are appropriate, relevant and properly placed, i.e. the words and the illustration are adjacent — not pages apart.
- They are accurate — which means that books about reproduction don't coyly avoid the act of insemination, and whales are called mammals, not fish.
- The explanation of natural phenomena is clearly written. (One of the major criticisms of information books for children is the turgid, dense prose which may accompany very good illustrations or photographs. It is not easy to write simply and clearly about complex matters.)
- They are interesting and stimulating to look at and read. Why should a 'fact' book be less engrossing than a story book?
- They are logical, and help the child make sense of the world. A series of separate, isolated facts leads nowhere. Nor is such a presentation 'scientific' — science is concerned with cause and effect, with **why** as well as **what** and **how**.

The successful non-fiction book manages to supply information and yet make the reader sense that discovery is open-ended. There is more to be known, and finding out is exciting . . . The purpose of non-fiction is to help the reader toward knowledge — knowledge as contrasted to merely information or fact.

(Lukens, 1976).

In 'fact' books, watch out for:

- teleology: nature explained in terms of purpose — 'birds fly north **so that** they will be warmer.'
- anthropomorphism: explaining natural phenomena from a human point of view — 'bears **feel happy** when they have plenty to eat.'
- over-exaggeration — 'Isn't nature **wonderful**!'

POSTSCRIPT

Parents sometimes ask: How do I keep up the supply of books for my children? Thankfully, the answer to this question lies near at hand for most of us — as close as our friendly local library. The Golden Age of children's books has been matched, perhaps even instigated, by an ever-growing band of children's librarians who are knowledgeable, approachable and tireless. Nowadays children as young as two, accompanied by a parent, stagger out of the library under an immense pile of self-chosen books. Most local libraries have a children's section, well stocked and welcoming. (If there isn't one near you — agitate!). There are few restrictions on borrowing and some libraries hold story-reading and story-telling sessions after school and during holidays. Once the children know where the library is, they have found a life-long source of information, pleasure and enlightenment. And while they're borrowing, so can you.

Within the constraints of the family budget, children should be able to have books at home that they can look at and read whenever they like, that become in a very real sense a part of their life. Some parents always make books a part of Christmas and birthday presents — and encourage fond relatives to do likewise. If the children are given pocket money, or are able to earn a little themselves, they may wish to buy some of the relatively cheap children's paperbacks which now abound. Second-hand shops often have shelves full of books, some of them unexpected treasures. A child who loves the work of a particular author may want to collect everything he wrote, and this is one way of building up a collection of one's own. And book shelves are easily made — wooden planks separated by bricks. Compared with most children's toys, book-buying is an inexpensive and lasting pleasure. Unlike skate-boards and battery-operated spacemen, books grow with the child, and the child grows with the books.

Barometers, wind-gauges, cannot be used as engines (Ezra Pound on literature).

PHOTO ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

	Page
I.E.C.D.	Cover
I.E.C.D.	1
K. Hartup for F.K.U. Vic.	3
I.E.C.D.	5
K. Hartup for F.K.U. Vic.	6
I.E.C.D.	7
G. McKay	8
D. Rickards	9
I.E.C.D.	11
I.E.C.D.	13
J. Epstein	14
K. Hartup for F.K.U. Vic.	15
I.E.C.D.	17
I.E.C.D.	19

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